



BIOGRAPHY



North Korean communist dictator Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea sparked a war in which thousands of Koreans, Americans, Chinese and others died.

Kim Il Sung
(1912-1994)

President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, and general secretary of the Committee of the Korean Workers Party, Kim Il Sung was born into a peasant family in the village of Mangyondae, southwest of P'yongyang, on April 15, 1912. Kim was the eldest of three sons. His original name was Kim Song-ju, but he later adopted the name Kim Il Sung, a legendary hero of the Korean independence movement. When Kim was seven, his family immigrated to Manchuria, China, where he attended school. Japan had annexed Korea in 1910, and from an early age Kim was involved in anti-Japanese endeavors. In 1929 he was expelled from school and jailed for activities against Japanese expansion into northeastern China. At 19 he joined the underground Chinese Communist Youth League, and by 1932 he was leading Korean guerillas on raids against Japanese outposts in northern Korea. Fleeing the Japanese crackdown on guerillas in the region, Kim and his followers went to the far eastern areas of Siberia in the Soviet Union in 1941. Little is known about his relationship with the Soviets during this period.

Soviet Relations

In August 1945 Kim surfaced as a major in the Soviet Army that took the Japanese surrender in the northern half of Korea above the 38th parallel. The Soviets designated him to establish a provisional administrative system in the North. After eliminating numerous potential other communist and nationalist opponents, in February 1946 Kim founded and headed the Soviet-sponsored North Korea Provisional People's Committee. In July the North Korean Worker's Party was organized with Kim Il Sung as vice chairman but actually in charge. Kim also organized the North Korean People's Army

(NKPA). Under Soviet sponsorship, Kim led the communization of North Korea through people's committees founded at the local, county and provincial levels. In February 1947 the North Korean People's Assembly replaced the People's Committee, and Kim headed the executive branch of the government.



Kim Il Sung before the war.

tion of the country. After this, the U.N. recognized the Republic of Korea (South Korea) as the only legitimate government in Korea. North Korea held its own elections in August 1948 and in September proclaimed the DPRK as the legitimate government of all Korea.

Invasion of South Korea

Kim was elected premier and he dedicated himself to unifying the country. After subversion efforts in the south failed and supported by the northern communist leadership, Kim ordered a military invasion of the South, which began on June 25, 1950. Kim believed unrealistically that the invasion would trigger an uprising in the South that would bring certain victory. Although North Korea's "Fatherland Liberation War" initially enjoyed success, the U.S./U.N. intervention turned the tide. Kim himself led his troops in the early months of the war and was wounded in a battle near Hamhung. Faced with the unexpected U.N. forces, Kim panicked and his army disintegrated. The intervention of the People's Republic of China in November 1950 saved North Korea; however, China took over management of the war. Peng Dehuai, commander of the Chinese forces, allegedly proclaimed that the war was between General Douglas MacArthur and himself and that Kim had no part in it.

In December 1950, after Chinese forces regained P'yongyang, Kim issued a diatribe at the third joint assembly of the Central Committee meeting in which he blamed virtually all Koreans who had played any part in the war. He publicly admonished government officials, and removed numerous individuals from

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authority and expelled them from the party.

However, as the fortunes of the war improved, Kim reinstated most of them. In 1952 a group of leading party members plotted against Kim and attempted a military coup against him in early 1953. When it failed, they were arrested and most were executed.

The brutal three-year-long Korean War was destructive for North Korea. Besides suffering estimated battlefield deaths of some 295,000 soldiers and many more civilians killed, the North was physically devastated. Chinese forces did not withdraw until 1958 and the alliance between South Korea and the United States rendered hope of victory over the southern regime virtually impossible. The demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two countries became one of the most heavily fortified areas in the world.

Rebuilding in the Wake of War

In the wake of the war, Kim focused on consolidating power and rebuilding his country's industrial and military power. Following a classic Stalinist model, Kim purged communists and all potential opponents.

Executions, imprisonment and forced exile were rampant. The DPRK shut itself off from the

world, maintaining diplomatic relations only with communist-bloc countries. As Kim endeavored to balance his country between the two adversaries in the growing Sino-Soviet conflict, North Korea became one of the most xenophobic regimes on the globe.

In January 1968, after a P'yongyang-sponsored assassination attempt of President of the Republic of Korea Park Chung Hee, the DPRK triggered a major confrontation with the United States when it seized the *USS Pueblo* in international waters off its coast.

Finally, after two decades of isolation, Kim in the 1970s attempted to join the world community. Low-level talks with the South began, and Kim tried to establish himself as a leader in the Third World and so-called nonaligned nations. In 1973 North Korea secured observer status in the United Nations, and by 1976 it had established diplomatic relations with 130 countries. North Korea also became a major arms supplier to guerrilla movements and radical states in the Third World and a supporter of international terrorism.



Kim Il Sung waves to the crowd.

At Odds with the South

Possible rapprochement with South Korea was shattered in 1976 when North Korean troops killed two U.S. officers at P'anmunjom. Then in July 1977 an unarmed U.S. helicopter was shot down. Several North Korean spy rings and underground actions in South Korea were uncovered in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including a plan to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan in 1982 and an actual attempt in Rangoon, Burma, in October 1983. A North Korean ship dispatched to destroy a South Korean nuclear power plant was destroyed in 1982, and in 1984 South Korea discovered a series of underground invasion tunnels under the DMZ. In 1986, North Korea threatened to disrupt the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, and in November 1987, terrorists linked to North Korea brought down a South Korean airliner, killing 115 people.

As communist regimes collapsed in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the absolute dictator Kim remained among the last of the world's Stalinist holdouts. He consolidated his powers as the "Supreme Leader," and he developed his own political philosophy, known as *Chuch'e* (self-reliance), which included political independence, insofar as this was possible, from both the USSR and China. This appealed to deep-rooted Korean resistance to foreign control.

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Kim referred to *Chuch'e* as "a creative application of Marxism-Leninism."

In his last years, dealings with South Korea once again intensified. In September 1990 the prime ministers of the two Koreas conducted the first high-level talks between the countries since the end of the Korean War.

Kim Il Sung died of heart failure on July 8, 1994, at his villa at Myonhyang-san Mountain about 100 miles north of P'yongyang. He was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il.

—Joe P. Dunn

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